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RESEARCH PAPER

RURAL LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of information dissemination has been universally accepted as an essential developmental tool and a basic resource upon which the improvement in living condition of populations is anchored. Usually, a well informed society is considered as an enlightened and developed one and as such, the importance of libraries as an efficient 'vehicle' for acquiring, organizing and making information available, cannot be overemphasized. Unfortunately however, little attention has been given to the role libraries can play in the overall development of Nigeria, particularly her vision 2020 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This article therefore highlights the roles library can play in community and overall national development.

Keywords: *Development, Rural communities, Library, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

The federal government of Nigeria has made attempts to solve the problems of under-development of rural areas by evolving at one time or the other, programmes by various names; such as operation feed the nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), War Against indiscipline (WAI), Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRRI), Mass Mobilization for Self- reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), Mass Literacy Campaign (MIC), Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) and Family support programme (FSP) to mention but a few. However, no serious thought has been given, either at Local, State or Federal level, to the roles rural libraries can play in the developmental welfare of the rural community.

Considering the fact that rural areas in Nigeria constitute 70% of the country's population while the urban area makes up the other 30% (Omopupa, 2006), there cannot be national development without including the rural areas. According to Aboyade (1990), the well-being of the greater percentage of the population depends on the benefits of rural development, which in turn, radiate national development. Bell (1979) in this regards holds the view that "the dependence upon information to create innovation and change, places a high premium on the ability of (developing countries) nations to access and use information to create advances in society".

Borcherdt (1977), in discussing the need for rural information services, remarked that "none of the thousands of projects in the developing countries can be executed without the fundamental conditions of the establishment of a literate and numerate (rural) society, and a system for continuous provision of idea- exchange, thought and knowledge on which the rural society can "feed-on; with suitable modifications to construct own cultural and industrial destiny. Thus, rural dwellers need relevant, efficient and current information and hence, the need for libraries.

Although Omopupa (2006) asserts that the concept of a library is seen by an average dweller in Nigeria, as foreign, due to high levels of illiteracy, non-adaptability of library services to local environment needs and poor library services in the few rural settings where they do exist. The library's role as a major vehicle for dissemination of information cannot just acquire and dispatch it since the needs of the populace must be identified especially to support and sustain the educational, cultural, economic, social, political, and other programmes geared toward improving the standard of living in rural communities. Indeed, the importance of libraries in general, as the most efficient 'vehicle' for acquiring, organizing and making information available, cannot be overemphasized as regards overall development in Nigeria, particularly her vision 2020 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This article therefore highlights the role library can play in community and national development.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

The New Encyclopedia Britannica defines rural community as a society in which there is a low ratio of inhabitants to open land and the most important economic activity is the production of food stuffs, fibers and raw materials. However, Mabogunje (1980) sees the rural part of Nigeria as representing the preserve of much of what is traditionally under developed in the socio-economic life of the country. By implication, a rural community in Nigeria could therefore be seen as that fraction of the population that live in the rural areas of the country either in clustered, dispersed settlement or may be nomadic, but sharing values in common and are directly or indirectly dependent on primary production of agricultural products and also engaged in dyeing, fishing, black smiting, trading or small scale mining.

Although the characteristics of the rural population in Nigeria vary according to different geographical locations, the most common among them is the high degree of illiteracy (Erine, 1986). Diso (1994) holds the view that "rural areas in Nigeria are generally characterized by poor living conditions - absolute poverty and absence of almost all amenities of life. Available data has shown that the overall illiteracy level in Nigeria is about 35-40 percent and much lower among women and in rural communities (Harande, 2009). Hence, rural populaces are predominantly farmers, engaged in primary production of agricultural products and other raw materials for industries.

Comparatively, rural communities in the northern part of Nigeria are more dispersed in nature and are nomadic, while southern communities are clustered in nature. In addition to farming, the rural populace also engages in fishing, black smiting, lumbering, small scale, mining and trading. Not only is their reading habit poor, they lack access to information which is a vital necessity for their developmental process.

Another common characteristic is the poor road net work system, because these communities are inaccessible, and therefore, makes information dissemination on the state of the nation's economy, health- especially modern family planning difficult. The obvious consequences of this, is population explosion in the rural areas. Also, the absence of amenities in these areas does not encourage or attract suitable personnel to the areas and in all, there is a low rate of unemployment as virtually everyone is self employed in agriculture, fishing, trading, black smiting, mining or small scale industries.

Camble (1994) commented that "the success of rural information programmes rest squarely on the availability and use of quality information by rural development workers and rural people and that many rural development programmes have failed in developing countries because they were planned with insufficient relevant information".

INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE RURAL DWELLERS

According to Harande (2009), the diverse nature of rural communities indicates that their information needs are many and multidimensional. In the case of Nigeria, it is very important to determine the totality of their information needs. This is in accordance to the observation by Issa (2003) that economic and national power and status are considered to be dependent upon the wide dissemination and use of information and knowledge. Hence, the rural populace needs information to mobilize and educate them on the ever-changing world of new ideas for their social, economic, educational, political and technological improvement and transformation.

For our rural communities to be developed therefore, they have to be well informed in all aspect of life. Although Alegbeleye and Aina (1985) have previously provided information need categories of rural communities, Mchombu (1992) identified health, agriculture and income-generating activities as the areas most needed by rural people. For the purpose of this review therefore, the following information needs shall be discussed especially new methods in agriculture in order to maximize their production; need for essential amenities like good transportation system,

electricity, schools and good water supply; health care deliveries such as EPI, health care centers for their pregnant women, family planning and environment sanitation; how to form cooperative societies and how to get credit facilities from governments and their agencies; their culture and the culture of other people; and the need for recreation that is, the various ways by which they could relax after a hard day's work

Considering therefore, the highlighted information needs of rural dwellers, it is important that rural libraries should be able to identify information needs peculiar to a particular community and preferred ways of disseminating information.

WAYS RURAL LIBRARIES CAN MEET THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE RURAL COMMUNITIES

Aboluwarin (1998), Agboola (2000), Ikhizama and Okojie (2001) have documented the efforts of some libraries in information dissemination in rural areas of Nigeria. Nevertheless adequate attention has not been paid to library services in the rural areas of Nigeria. It is very important for the Librarian in charge of the rural Libraries to educate the rural populace on the need and the importance of the Libraries. The rural dwellers need to be told the types of information they can get from the library.

Agriculture: According to Harande (2009), the greatest area of information needs by rural Nigerians is in agriculture and such information needs include planting treated seeds, soil conservation, prevention of plants and animal diseases, fertilizer application, farm machineries, recommended thinning practices, proper storage of farm products, marketing techniques, cooperative activities and other agro-cultural activities.

Judging by their professional background, librarians may not be agriculturalists, but they are usually equipped to provide technical information services to experts in other fields using the language they understand most. In providing agricultural extension services, librarians may need to adopt canvassing or mobile libraries to bring library services to the doorsteps of the farmers in the rural areas (Omopupa, 2006). Nwalo (2003) points out that the collections carried by mobile libraries reflect the requests previously made and the perceived need of the local communities where there are service stations.

Okiy (2003) has previously reported that, "rural development is a basis for economic development and information is an important ingredient in development process. Hence, the library can liaise with states and federal ministries of Agriculture, Government and private Agricultural projects to collect information which could be in form of books, pamphlets, leaflets, survey reports films, pictures and charts. The library can also liaise with agricultural science teachers in the neighboring schools in order to know which supplementary books and non-book on agriculture can be house in the library to assist the students.

Issa (1998) on the other hand observes that "the rural populace suffers from acute low productivity and economic retrogression due mainly to ignorance which is also a direct consequence of either inadequate or total lack of information provision to them". Agricultural officers attached to local governments and agricultural rural extension workers can be use by the library to get information needed by the rural populace. They can also be used to disseminate information to them (rural dwellers). This is possible because of their direct contact with the rural dwellers. Most of these agricultural extension workers are provided with motor and bikes by the federal government to enable them reach the rural dwellers, especially in areas that are not motor able.

Cooperative officers, both state and private can be invited by the library to give lectures on the information of cooperatives societies. The library should be able to give information on various facilities that can be get from such societies, such as credit facilities and agents through which fertilizers can be get at subsidized rates. These will help to boost their agricultural output. Exhibitions on improved variety of agricultural products, agricultural tools, posters and leaflets translated to local languages can be good ways of disseminating information to them.

The library can also assist the teachers in organizing programmers' for clubs like young farmers clubs in their schools. Documentary films on new techniques of farming, including rearing of poultry birds and domestic animals like goats, pigs and sheep can be acquired from government and private establishment. These can be translated to local dialects of the people for more impact.

Education: It has long been established that most 'ruralists' or community-residents are poor, semi-literates, absorbed in the daily struggle for economic survival and unaware of the information services which could assist

them in that struggle (Chijioke, 1995). Thus, education can enhance the social status of ruralists or community-residents. There are various ways the library can enhance the educational development of a rural community. Tugbiyele (1977) saw libraries as not just a centre to keep and read the books but a place to be used as community education centre with facilities for the effective use of non formal education media. The point he was making here was that rural libraries could be best used as information centre for effective use in adult education and development plans of the country.

Adult literacy classes to fulfill its roles on the federal government programme on adult literacy campaign, services of retired teachers in the community can be used. Materials like books on alphabets and numbers, pictures, posters and artefacts, are very relevant for this group of the rural dwellers. Documentary films and recorded cassettes in local and English languages would be quite useful.

Story hour for children is an important function of the library. Pictures, easy to read picture books, simple story books could be found exciting by the children. This will help develop their interest in reading and library usage. Lectures on informative topics like the importance of literacy, the effect of rumour monger and roles of different professionals in the society. For the secondary school, relevance to their curriculum will go a long way in enhancing their knowledge.

In addition to these various activities, the library provide materials in local languages for its users, where these are not available, the services of translators could be employed to help translate some of the existing literature in English language to the local dialect of the community. For examples, books like the Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare have been translated to Hausa Language and published by Oxford University Press and N.N.P.C respectively.

Health: According to Harande (2009), health information includes how individuals can prevent different diseases that affect them; the healthcare delivery services available to them and what it costs. The centrality of health information needs to community-based information services has been proven in a number of studies (Mwaro, 1996; Waswa, 1998). The library can collect information from state and federal ministries of health about various programmes dealing with health matters. Liaising with other agencies like the community health care centers, can also help in disseminating information to the rural dwellers.

Lectures by community health workers on good environmental sanitation/diets and the importance of antenatal and post-natal health care to pregnant women, will surely go a long way in getting them informed. Posters in English and Local dialect on immunization, how to care for their teeth and on other aspects of health can serve as good sources of disseminating information on health hazards such as Acquired Immune Deficiency (AIDs), effect of smoking on health and family planning. Documentary films with commentaries and recorded lectures in local language of the community can also be used to give the rural dwellers.

Politics: Information is needed on political rights of the people and how they can exercise such right (Harande, 2009). The library can collect information on government policies and political situation in the country from radio, newspaper magazine as well as party agents. Information got from these sources can be translated and disseminated to the rural dwellers orally or in written form. Pamphlets, leaflets in English and vernacular can also be used to give information. In addition to radios and televisions, lectures are always interpreted to their local dialect in order to reach a wider audience.

Socio-Economic Information: Issa (1998) had observed that "the rural populace suffers from social and economic retrogression. In line with this, Diso (2005) commented that "the structural and infrastructural problems, official corruption, and economic policies growing insecurity, and unstable power supply hamper this development". In this regards, Harande (2009) reported that rural inhabitants in the present day Nigeria are not reaping from the fruits of the enormous wealth the country has. Reason being the fact that information services that will greatly enhance their productivity, transform their community into a lively and enlightened one, and empower their economic base, is not effective and relevant, and the service is not fashioned towards it.

In view of the above, the library can play a very vital role by disseminating information to enhance the economic well being of the rural dwellers. Information on the uses of cooperative societies, credit facilities and where they are available will go a long way in meeting their socio-economic information needs. Film shows, talks, lectures on morals and consequences of crimes will have positive impact on their social life and in turn national development.

Information can be come from the following areas; the federal and state ministries of trade, commerce and industries, cooperative societies, small and large scales industries, community banks, federal and state ministries of information, social, youths, sports and culture. Information gathered from these sources can be collated and disseminated by the librarian whenever they are required by the rural dwellers. Information on current prices on agricultural crops and world markets available for such crops can be got from newspapers, trade literature and even from cable networks news.

Culture and Recreation: The rural dwellers have great interest in the preservation of their culture. In this regard, several conferences and workshops have been organized to raise the consciousness and awareness of stakeholders in developing countries towards the appreciation and utilization of information in their planning and decision-making processes (Kegan, 1999). However, these efforts to entrench information on culture seemed to have failed to achieve the desired result (Admorah, 1983). The function of the library to expose the people to the culture and traditions of other people through film shows, displays of photographs, posters and paintings is therefore attracting attention.

To preserve the culture and traditions of the community, oral interviews with chiefs and elders can be taped on cassettes or written. Festivals, dances, songs, customary marriages can also be taped or filmed with commentaries preferably in local language of the community. By so doing, the culture and traditions of the community are preserved for research by future generations.

Recreational needs of the rural dwellers can be met through the provision of recreational materials like games, story books, especially fictions and humorous films by the rural libraries. Organizing play and drama on areas like past history of the community could also be another way of relaxation.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY RURAL LIBRARIES

Most libraries in rural areas in Nigeria are branches of urban public libraries instituted by state governments. Most of their activities are directed by the urban public library's librarian who is not familiar with the complexity of the information need of the rural dwellers.

Among the problems encountered by rural libraries is the inadequacy of material in local languages. Most of our books are published in English language when, in actual fact, most of our rural populace cannot even read and write in their local dialect. Very little has been done in area of publishing in vernacular. Erinle (1986) also identified this problem as "language problem" and confirmed that only very few vernacular literature exists and our local newspaper are mainly in English language with few exceptions.

The circulations of the few vernacular newspapers are also limited and inadequate. A major problem facing rural libraries is inadequate finance. There is need for heavy use of audio visuals in a non-literate society and these are quite expensive to acquire and maintain. In fact, rural libraries need money for the following: a) To acquire local materials for their community. b) To translate information from English language to vernacular. c) To record on tapes and transcribe oral traditions and such other important festivals that may serve as an aid in the reconstruction of the history of the communities. d) To encourage exhibitions, lectures, adult literacy classes, plays and drama. e) To produce posters, leaflets and pamphlets. f) Vehicles to run around collecting information from various sources and disseminating them to rural dwellers and the surrounding hamlets.

Lack of qualified personnel is one of the problems often encountered. It is not in all cases a rural library can have an indigene or someone who understands and speaks the local dialect. In such a situation, the services of a translator will be required and this involves an additional expense. The unavailability of social amenities like electricity, good water supply, hospital and community health centers and schools often discourage people from accepting jobs in rural areas. The library with the assistance of cooperation from these workers can disseminate information to the rural populace by way of organizing exhibitions, giving lectures and talks. Due to these depressing problems, most rural libraries cannot meet with the information needs of their communities. They are mostly used as reading rooms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable library services to reach the grassroots level, local government councils should be given the mandate to establish and finance libraries in their communities. Also, the government may help and encourage promotions of publications in local languages. Translators on the other hand can be encouraged to translate existing literature in English to local languages, while individuals and existing newspaper houses are encouraged to publish translated

versions of the Nigeria dailies. This will enable their information to get to the grassroots. Concord newspapers have already taken the lead by having Hausa version of its publications.

Our rural areas provide the abode for the majority of the people at the grassroots. It is of paramount importance that they should be made to know the relevance and uses of libraries as sources of information for their development. This can be done by way of mounting readership campaign through mass media, posters, leaflets, lectures and talks. This might even stimulate state or federal government to make policy statements on rural libraries as means of rural development.

In conclusion, information needs of the rural dwellers, rural libraries have been enumerated and ways rural libraries can meet with their information needs have been discussed. Useful suggestions have been preferred on ways the rural populace can be well informed in areas such as agriculture, culture, education, health, politics, recreation and socio-economy which form the basis of their developments.

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